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Double Visions:
How Trends and Leaders Shape the Workplace of the Future

by Scott Francisco

"As for the future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it." - Antoine de Saint-Exupery

"The future is not a result of choices among alternative paths offered by the present, but a place that is created--created first in the mind and will, created next in activity. The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating…" - John Schaar

The Future

We all love to talk about the future, and if we have the opportunity, to buy or sell it. From Wall Street to the workplace the future is a big market. Who wouldn't want to buy a piece? Cash in on the next big thing, look smart, get ahead of the competition – *act now and save 50%!* The problem is, we never really know what "it" is. We can guess, hope, predict, dread, or create it. We have a number of things that help us do this, but most often we look to either trends or leaders. Each point to the future and each drive a different bargain. Both can be very helpful and both can get us into trouble.

Trends and Leaders

The problem with trends is that everyone else is already following them. It's like Woody Allen says in

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Annie Hall (quoting Groucho Marx): "My trouble is that I wouldn't want to be part of a club that would have someone like me as a member." Trends are this way: We like to know what they are, but we have mixed feelings about 'joining' them. They make us feel up-to-date, connected and secure on one hand, but "trendy" is always just behind the times. Trends try to predict the future based on what already exists: a contradiction in terms.

When it comes to leaders, we have a different problem: these people are asking us to trust them, to walk with them into the unknown, and to fund the trip! Looking back in history we can see many successes and even more failures. So we know leaders are sometimes right, but it's always a leap of faith.

When it comes to re-shaping the physical environment of our organizations – workspace for valuable employees – every business faces a critical question: To lead or to follow… and in what combination? What is the best balance between following trends and creating the kind future we actually want to live in?

I believe good design will always require a dialogue. This is why we are always *talking* about the future. We need to test our ideas and visions against those of our peers. We are searching for the best balance between what we see happening around us and our vision for the future we want to create.

In the spirit of this dialogue, here are two visions of "the workplace of the future" that I hope will provoke even more conversation:

Workplace of the Future #1 — Trend spotting

This first vision of the future is quite popular right now: The young generation (Millennials) are leading the way. Following their lead, *society gets increasingly wired*, technology continues to get better: *faster, smaller and embedded in everything*. (nytimes.com/2011/01/02/science/02see.html) This makes it even easier to share information, communicate and interact virtually, and less necessary to 'be' anywhere particular at any particular time.

All information becomes 'democratic' as it becomes accessible to everyone everywhere: *'wikileaks for everyone and everything.'* Communication efficiencies and 'information integration' increase exponentially: refrigerators talk to the grocer, toilets

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report to your doctor, and your conference room knows how many people are using it and what they are doing.

These technological advances increase "collaboration" and "innovation." People become smarter and more creative because they can be connected to everybody-in-the-world-all-the-time. The acceleration of innovation becomes a virtuous cycle, and the resulting **army of innovators** helps continuously create and improve digital products, services and networks. People are happier because they can finally have the work-life balance that has previously eluded them. (See *Work Naked*, flexibility.co.uk/flex-work/general/work-naked.htm) All of this technology and mobility also saves the environment, for reasons too numerous/complex to mention. *[Picture green grassy fields with windmills.]*

The predominate space outcome of these advances is that it has become unnecessary for anyone (or any organization) to have their own dedicated or private workspace, or big piles of dirty, messy physical stuff on shelves or desks. Large, boring, enclosed offices and cubicles with wires, big computers, stacks of paper and shelves of books are a finally thing of the past.

Because there are now less people *and* less stuff in the workplace, much less space is required. Companies capitalize on the drastic "reduction in space needs" even if this is just keeping up with the competition (see benchmarking). (peoplecube.com/solutions-actual-utilization.htm) As the whole economy becomes fluid and informationalized (ask IBM's "WATSON" from Jeopardy), the nature of work is redefined as "cloud control**"** – *put whatever you have in the cloud, and find whatever you need in the cloud!* Technological systems function flawlessly (of course) and help us reach a perfect equilibrium between individual and collective human aspirations and our natural environment!

**Workplace Story #2 —
Follow the Leaders**

This second vision is a little less orthodox: As the complexity of global economic, social and environmental challenges mounts, *the value of thoughtful, creative and rigorous problem-solving rises*. Smarter people and organizations are in greater demand than ever before. Due to demographic shifts, fewer young people are entering the workforce. Meanwhile, "digital immersion" has exacerbated the problem as Millennials begin to show measurably lower critical thinking skills! (nytimes.com/2011/09/04/technology/technology-in-schools-faces-questions-on-value.htm) We enter the perfect storm: an aging workforce and a premium on diminishing talent known as the war-for-talent. (nytimes.com/2011/05/18/technology/18talent.html)

As the increased cost of talent and labor skyrockets, massive shifts in the global economy are felt. The resulting need to get the most output from a shrinking (and more expensive) talent pool drives a new look at the strategies, tools and amenities in the workplace. This is a game-changer for facilities management, leading to the new mantra: *"There is always something more we can do."* (nytimes.com/2011/03/26/technology/26recruit.html)

The primary goal of facilities managers shifts from "cost- control" to concierge service, where: "How can I help you do your work better?" and "What do you need in your workplace to do your job more effectively?" are the most important questions. The honest answer leads to a (gasp!) *increase* in space needs, as the advantage of "being-there-mentorship" and "multi-space" become critical tools in high-performing organizations. More "personal ownership" of a wider variety of space types guarantees face-time between senior and junior colleagues and also ensures long life, loose fit spaces that reduce disposability and

strain on the environment. (tenshades-ofgreen.org/shade5.html)

This new emphasis allows the talent to tailor space to personal preferences, to harness more functionality, freedom and comfort, and increases access to multiple personal spaces tailored to concentration, collaboration and social activity. The innovator culture also embraces hosting, where collaboration is conducted in well-appointed personal work dens.

At the same time, the liabilities of immersive digital environments drives a return to focal things that engage physical space, time, skills and place. Tangible things like books, tools, drawings, models, instruments, labs and libraries slow us down and become the centerpiece of a new leadership method for counteracting information overload, and the toll this takes on innovation ecosystems. Similar to physical fitness programs, leaders embrace: no pain, no *gain* innovation, the recognition that innovation cannot be made more efficient.

In this story, workspace becomes a leadership tool and competitive advantage for organizations and innovation.

Back to the Present

Both of these stories are rhetorical, of course. We can never predict the future with any certainty. But we can be part of *creating* a future we want to live in. Whether we embrace it or not, we are the leaders that will determine how the workplace will look, feel and perform in the near future. So let's keep talking about it, trying new strategies and seeking the best balance between the tried, true and most consistent with our aspirations for the future. ∎

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